To be Black, Queer and Radical: Centring the epistemology of Marielle Franco

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Research article

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to pay tribute to Marielle Franco, a Brazilian LGBTQ+ Black activist from the favela who was brutally executed in March 14, 2018. Taking Marielle's life and death as a case study, I will demonstrate how she embodied Black feminist theory and practice and how her execution can be better addressed by situating it within the context of spatialities of race and the necropolitical governance of Rio de Janeiro.

Keywords: Black feminism, Marielle Franco, necropolitics, Brazil.

Introduction

In this paper, I will contextualise the life of Marielle Franco; unpacking her political career and positionality as a "subaltern" figure (Spivak, 1988) in order to show how her political praxis reflects Black feminist thought. I will also use Marielle Franco's master's dissertation on public policy in the favelas of Rio to propose her work as a starting point for further theoretical investigations. Finally, I will explore key concepts of decolonial scholarship that are relevant to my argument, to analyse her execution in relation to necropolitics as a hegemonic procedure of the state.

According to hooks (2000), Black women's resistance historically relies on three interrelated components: breaking the silence about oppression, developing self-reflexive speech and confronting elite discourses. Marielle distinctively articulated the three elements through her life trajectory and through her voice. Marielle Franco was a Black woman raised in Maré, a group of sixteen favelas[1] in Rio, a sociologist with a master's degree in public policy and one of the most voted-for members of Rio's city council in the 2016 elections. She was a member of the left wing political party Partido Socialismo e Liberdade [Socialism and Liberty Party] and had the potential to achieve national visibility due to her strong oratorical style and radical politics.

Determined to speak out against Black genocide in the favelas, Marielle was an outspoken critic of police violence, which disproportionately affects Black people. She not only condemned police brutality in the favelas and the genocide of Black people, but played a key role on a council committee overseeing the military intervention in Rio, confronting elite discourses that legitimise violence against Black people. In the days preceding her assassination, Franco publicly criticised violent actions carried out by the

1 The favela was historically linked with criminalised poverty, dirtiness, instability, danger and diseases, stigmatising the inhabitants as scum (Nascimento, 1989). Richardson and Skott-Myhre (2012) articulate Bordieu's theory of habitus to understand the favela as a place that has been stigmatised by society to the point that it is only understood and appreciated by their own inhabitants. The favela has been also conceptualised as a racialised space within the cultural, economic, social, geographical, political and colonial divide between North and South, where the favela, as the South, represents the organisational struggle, survival skills and resilience of the marginal, urban outcasts (Imas and Weston, 2012).

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military police operating in the Acari favela in Rio's north zone, including the murder of two young men. On March 13, 2018, she tweeted:

> Another killing of a young person which could go on the military police records. Matheus Melo was leaving church. How many more will have to die for this war to end? (Franco, 2018)

The following day, minutes after leaving an event about Black women in which she articulated her life experiences within Black feminist activism, Marielle was shot to death. Until her final minutes, Marielle occupied her *lugar de fala* [standpoint], a concept translated by Black feminist philosopher Djamila Ribeiro (2017) in dialogue with feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Sojouner Truth, Lélia Gonzalez, bell hooks and others. *Lugar de fala* developed from the discussion of the concept of feminist standpoint (Collins, 2000) through radical critical theory and decolonial thought (Ribeiro, 2017). *Lugar de fala* does not relate to an individual position, which would be reductive, but to an understanding of structural oppressions that obstruct the right of speech and the humanity of certain groups of individuals. It is important to note here that Ribeiro (2017) highlights that one oppression is not superior or more violent than the other, but that they are interlocking. This was theorised previously by The Combahee Collective (1986), who conceptualised the simultaneity of oppression; by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) through the concept of intersectionality; and by Collins (2000) in standpoint theory.

According to Ribeiro (2017), the role of Black feminist activists as heirs of ancestral heritage is the fight to restore denied humanities. Ribeiro is located within a long lineage of Black feminist scholars from Brazil who worked in dialogue with international Black feminist academics, particularly Lélia Gonzalez and Sueli Carneiro. Lélia Gonzalez articulated a new epistemology called Amefricanity (Gonzalez, 1988a, 1988b), the transnational articulation of a Black and Latin American feminism capable of encompassing the Black diaspora in the Americas through the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender and imperialism. Ribeiro is also building on the work of Sueli Carneiro, who raises relevant arguments about epistemicide, questioning the role of education in the reproduction of powers, knowings, subjectivities and "cides" produced by the dispositif of raciality/power (Carneiro, 2005).

Marielle is also located in a lineage of Black women who dared to occupy politics and use their social and political location of *favelada*[2] as an advantageous point of view. The use of *favelada* for example can be traced back to Benedita da Silva, the first Black woman to become a member of the city council, a congresswoman, a senator and a vice-governor of Rio de Janeiro state in the 1990s. Benedita da Silva's political slogan was "woman, Black and *favelada*" and her candidacy was built around her symbolism as someone who was "three times a minority" (Silva et al, 1997). As we can see, Marielle is situated within a tradition of Brazilian Black women who used their intersectional identities to assert a different way of doing politics. Marielle paid a tribute to her political predecessor Benedita da Silva in the last event she attended before being executed:

> Before we entered the [Rio's city] Council, Jurema [Batista] was there 10 years before. And 10 years before Jurema, was Benedita [da Silva]. We cannot wait another 10 years or think that I will be there for 10 years. (Franco, 2018)

Here, Marielle is paying respect to her ancestry while highlighting the importance of continuing the legacy – which fortunately is taking place. In the latest elections in Brazil, four women connected to Marielle were elected by Rio residents (Talíria Petrone, a friend, and three women who worked directly with Marielle: Renata Souza, Mônica Francisco and Dani Monteiro). Journalists called the continuation of her political legacy the "Marielle effect" (G1, 2018), but activists have a different way of framing it: they say that Marielle *virou semente* [was turned into seeds]. In other words, being physically buried does not mean her legacy is finished, but that she will blossom through the work of others.

2 The term *favelada* (or *favelado*) refers to a person who lives in a favela and is frequently used either as an a slur referring to negative stereotypes associated with the favela or as a (re)appropriation tactic adopted by the stigmatised group as a marker of solidarity (Beaton and Washington, 2015).

Historically, US Black women's activism demonstrates that empowerment requires both the changing of consciousness of Black women via community development strategies as well as the transformation of unjust social institutions (Collins, 2000). Marielle was involved in that fight through her attempt to change white patriarchal power from within the political institution while she was a city councillor. She also attended cultural events about Blackness such as the one she was present on the day of her assassination and produced knowledge for empowerment in her academic work as a sociologist with a master's dissertation about police interventions in the favelas. While explaining the three pillars of her political campaign (gender, race and the city), she says that she was going to "lead the debate about race and gender in this exclusionary city as a woman who is Black and *favelada*, using these three points as a vehicle to give voice" (Franco, 2016). As we can see, her positionality fits with Collin's (2000) conceptualisation of Black women's leadership strategy of "lift as we climb", amplifying the voices of other women when empowered.

Marielle used her voice as a city council member, scholar and activist to speak against the military interventions in the favelas. She was a vocal critic of the 2018 military intervention in Rio, saying "it threatened to raise bloodshed without addressing the root causes of violence" (Franco, 2018). The intervention, which was purported to curb rising street crime and drug-related gang violence, was introduced on February 16, 2018, after former Brazilian president Michel Temer signed a decree placing the army in charge of Rio's security forces. This move has produced considerable controversy. Critics say it harkens back to Brazil's authoritarian past and echoes the increasing nostalgia for the military government on the far right, while habitants of the favela accused the authorities of ignoring the failures and the violence produced by the militarisation of Rio's favelas ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympics (Martins, 2018).

The decree transferred the responsibility of public safety from Rio's police to the army, whose actions are not judged in a civil instance, but by a military forum. The National Council for Human Rights (2018) called the intervention a "licence to kill" as it creates a state of exception where the habitants of the favela are seen as the enemy of the state in a war ideology. The strategy has been used since the 1990s ahead of major international events and its use was intensified during the Worker's Party government for the World Cup and the Olympics. The latest report carried out by the Observatório da Intervenção [Intervention Observatory], a project created by the Centre of Studies of Public Safety of the University Candido Mendes, points out that the intervention did not result in significant changes in Rio's public safety (Observatório da Intervenção, 2018). The report also identifies varied human rights violations against the habitants of the favelas, including physical aggression, power abuse, excessive use of force and executions.

Marielle also amplified the voices of those to those affected by police interventions through her academic work, investigating the effects of the UPPs [Pacifying Police Unit] in Rio. In her master's degree dissertation, Marielle studied the UPPs in Rio's favelas, a programme that promised to end chronic violence by abandoning the tactic of confrontation. Marielle affirmed that the discourse of warfare against drug trafficking and the control of territories was a strategy to obtain the city's approval placing a "veil of peace above a policy of exclusion and punishment of the poor" (2014, p.11).

UPPs were installed in Rio as a new public safety programme based on the creation of a special police group to extensively occupy favelas in order to fight drug gangs, which were described by the authorities as the main cause of urban violence. The programme was presented both as an important weapon to recover territories lost to drug traffic and as a "peace police" that would lead to social inclusion, evidencing a juxtaposition of a war language and principles of community policing based on dialogue and mediation and not repression (Burgos et al, 2011). The creation of the UPPs is part of a long history of the state's failures to deal with the problem of urban violence, but the UPPs were distinct in the sense of attracting the sympathy of different sectors of the society, including right and left wing politicians, grassroots activists, intellectuals and businessmen (Burgos et al, 2011). It was also highly publicised outdoors on the streets, on bus advertisements and in the press. Marielle's argument is that, contrary to its discourse, the UPPs do not signal a transition to a different relationship between the state and the favelas, on the contrary:

> The approach of police raids in the favelas is substituted by territory occupation. But that occupation is not by the state as a whole, with rights, services, investments . . . It is a police occupation, with the military characteristics predominant in Brazilian police. It is the predominance of the politics underway since what is reinforced once again is an onslaught against the poor, with repression and punishment. (Franco, 2014, p.123)

For Marielle, the war discourse of fighting crime generates an arms race by the parts involved (the state and the drug militias), which leads to more violent reactions and a widespread sense of unsafety that is used to justify police interventions:

> What happens is a general peace propaganda in which the police, not politics, occupy the central space. This is another symptom of the supremacy of a security politics backed by militarisation. (Franco, 2014, p.123)

Marielle Franco's argument is that Brazil's neoliberal model of governance incorporates the Penal State as conceptualised by Loic Wacquant (2003), characterised by military action by the police, repression of the residents of favelas, a non-existent constitution of rights and segregation in the periphery of the city. The favela thus is always an oppressed spatiality, where habitants are considered less than human and in need of control, which comes in the form of state violence.

Racialised governance of Rio

In Brazil, racial spacialities are enforced by, amongst other elements, police brutality in the favelas, which limits the movement of Afro-Brazilians as have been widely discussed in critical race scholarship (Smith, 2016; Vargas, 2004; Alves, 2018). Through the police, the Brazilian state harasses and executes innocent young Black people living at the margins. Mitchell-Walthour's (2018) concept of racial spatiality is related to how relationships of subordination and domination are perpetuated through the existence of boundaries that limit the movement of certain racialised groups and maintain the power of dominant groups. The exclusion of Black people in social spaces is maintained through varied forms of violence, such as physical violence, exclusionary discourses and microaggressions. Therefore we can understand Marielle Franco's assassination as part of the necropolitical governance of Rio, where violence is the last resort technique for enforcing racial oppression.

After the era of enslavement, the Brazilian state did little or nothing to end mechanisms of oppression and extermination of Afrobrazilians, leaving white supremacy unthreatened in the country (Nascimento, 1989). The order of colonial power persists in Brazil in the cruel and pervasive ways in which new inequalities are created and maintained through what the Peruvian thinker Aníbal Quijano (2000) called coloniality of power. According to Quijano (2000), racial divisions have a colonial origin and therefore the model of power that is globally hegemonic today demands the study of coloniality. Ingrained in the colonialist perspective was the idea of race based on biological differences that created the Other as naturally inferior which enabled the codification of differences between the conquerors and the conquered (Quijano, 2000). Such new historical identities, crafted positions, were produced around the idea of race in a global structure of control of labour and were associated with social roles and geohistorical places. For example, the favela can be viewed through these lenses as a geohistorically criminalised space where life is not seen as valuable as life in other neighbourhoods and the favelado is seen as a disposable body. Marielle has also demonstrated her understanding of how such violent and racialised inequalities are constructed and reinforced by the authorities' discourses about public safety, generating a politics of extermination of Black lives:

> First they generate a violent inequality and create a war to exterminate the Black and poor population, then they use the fear discourse to generate even more violence. Until when will we be hostage to this extermination politics? (Franco, 2018)

In this fragment, Marielle is speaking out against a continuum of violence (Vargas, 2005) that extends from violent acts such as murders to violent discourses that are also constituent of an extermination politics. Developing his concept of a continuum of violence against Black people, Vargas (2005) traces mass killings to quotidian acts and representations that lead to discrimination, dehumanization and exclusion. Under the myth of racial democracy, discourses of fear that render the residents of the favelas as responsible for urban violence in Rio attempt to hide the deep racialised economic inequalities that lead to the premature death of Black people.

Racial democracy is an ideological myth according to which all Brazilians are equals and live without racially motivated conflict. The existence of this myth is based on alleged particularities of the colonial process of Brazil (Alfonso and Matos, 2013). Both the racial democracy myth and the denial of genocide against Black youth strengthen racial inequalities since they reinforce the silencing of the importance of race in social relations. Both are part of multiple forms of the coloniality of power in Brazil.

While I am aligned with Quijano's standpoint (2000), I would argue that there are multiple intersectional racial identities that are continually transforming and not static, where new strategies for the individual and collective creation of ideas may flourish. After all, this oppositional framework to articulate power depends on a homogenisation of identities and, to quote Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (2011), we are always in negotiation with a series of different positionalities that are always dislocating in relation to one another. Therefore I would like to stress, though it is beyond the scope of this article, *favelado* identity can be further problematised and explored in its nuances. Such exploration can be found for example in Carolina de Jesus' diary (1960) about her life as a *favelada*[3], but also in Marielle's appropriation of that identity to build a different way of doing politics. Marielle synthesises her *lugar de fala* and her Black feminist activism in a video campaign produced by the project *Vereadores que Queremos* [The City Council Members That We Want] in which she says that:

> One thing is to be born and live in the favela, a different one is to use this place of *favelada* to make claims and to make politics in a different way. (Franco, 2016)

In other words, new kinds of politics might emerge from a critical evaluation of one's positionality and the understanding of the ways in which opportunities are denied precisely because of that position (Collins, 2000). In the above paragraphs, I have demonstrated how Marielle crafts a new concept of politics, following the heritage of other Black women who came before her, and based on her interlocking identities. Having contextualised Marielle's words and action into Black feminist's genealogy, in the next section of this article I will put her assassination into the context of necropolitical governance in Brazil.

Gendered necropolitics

Achille Mbembe (2003) defines necropolitics as "the generalised instrumentalisation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations" (p.14) or, in other words, "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (p.14). It is a large-scale politics visible on the peripheries of the world, set against populations which are deemed disposable, or as Agamben would put it, a life without value (Agamben, 2010) because it is outside the neoliberal capitalist system of value.

Many Brazilian academics have applied the concept of necropolitics to the governance of favelas in Brazil, in which the disposable lives belong to the Black youth (Alves, 2014; Castelo, 2014; Hilário, 2016). In such understandings, the necropolitics of state violence go beyond police killings, including the "letting die" of Black Brazilians as evidenced by the disproportionate high incidence of premature deaths. When public policies focused on access to human rights are not seen as a possibility by capitalist institutions, militarisation and barbarisation becomes viable administrative models (Castelo, 2014). As the Brazilian philosopher Marildo Menegat (2012) observes, administering the barbaric becomes the maintenance strategy of a world in ruins.

Other Latin American scholars have located necropolitics in their own context of nation and peripheries. The Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2005) for example defined the colonial process of nation formation as necessarily involving the perpetuation of violence in an attempt to control or rather define its citizens activities, when the "white, heterosexual, Christian, landowner father" is the desirable citizen, the one who "deserves to live", who is protected. Informed by a decolonial epistemology, Castro-Gómez (2005) reminds us that the production of any national identity involves the creation of the other and that in the modern and colonial world such racial differences were not repressed but rather stimulated

3 See Brown (2011) and Vieira (2009) to explore the political and literary significance of de Jesus' work.

to produce an Otherness to be disciplined. Marielle also articulated the construction of the other to be disciplined in national projects of exclusion persecution and deaths to some groups and power to others:

> The Black body is the central element in the reproduction of inequalities. It is present in the heavily populated prisons, in the favelas and periphery designated as home. (Franco, 2017)

Home then becomes the place of police interventions that kill Black people indiscriminately. The scope of the necropolitical governance in Brazil can be demonstrated through the demographics of the genocide of Black youth: 75.4% of the victims killed by the police in Brazil are Black, according to a recent study carried out by the Brazilian Forum of Public Safety (2019). The same study also demonstrated that the number of deaths committed by the police increased 20% from 2017 to 2018, which results in even more killings of poor and Black young people. Brazilian anthropologist Jaime Amparo Alves (2012) created the concept macabre spacialities to describe how Black lives are dehumanised through the exploitation of Black individuals in low-paid jobs, segregation in favelas, high level of incarceration and police brutality. According to Alves (2012), state violence in general, particularly police killing, is part of a necropolitical governance strategy and an expression of the sovereign power's right over life and death.

In the case of police killings, this strategy takes place mainly in the favelas, a criminalised geography where bodies are inherently seen as outlawed and in need of control. There is a long history of attempts to control favelas in Brazil. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, both the church and the public administration have attempted to assert influence over such places, from providing basic infrastructure and public service to attempts to eradicate the favela (Vargas, 2008). But the residents of favela organised themselves with the creation of local associations. Then came the military dictatorship, the first institution to effectively repress and control favelas through intimidation, torture and the assassination of outspoken leaders between the late 1960s and mid 1970s (Vargas, 2008). This had a profound effect in the favelas since the local associations were deeply shaped by the military. Even so, organisers risked their lives to form new, autonomous and grassroots organisations and they were able to create important coalitions. The biggest current threat in the favelas is the military police, known for its brutality against the habitants of favelas.

The necropolitical governance of favelas results in the genocide of Black youth in Brazil. The definition of genocide used in this work is the one that Native American scholar and activist Ward Churchill (1997) created when remodelling the 1948 United Nations Genocide convention to provide a functional definition of genocide which focused on the actuality of destruction of a people regardless of intentionality of the perpetrators. Genocide is understood here as a denial of the right of existence of human groups just as homicide is the denial of the right to live of an individual (Churchill, 1997).

Churchill's definition is based on three forms of elimination that usually, although not always, function in combination with each other: physical genocide (direct or indirect killings, denial of fundamental medical attention, imposition of slave labour conditions, and forms of systematic economic deprivation), biological genocide (prevention of births, either by involuntary sterilisation or heightened rates of infant mortality) and cultural genocide, which involves the destruction of the specific character of the group through the expropriation of its religious, social or political practices. Brazil fits the criteria for a genocidal state with its rampant extrajudicial killings of Black men (resulting in an immense burden being placed upon women and children), its mass incarceration system that perpetuates the cycle of violence, forced evictions that deprive families of their homes and communities, the persecution of Afro-religions, the political marginalisation of Black people and the institutionalised discrimination against this population.

In spite of the effective and widespread use of necropolitics as a framework to understand the relationship between the repressive apparatus of the state and Blackness in different parts of the world, feminist scholars such as Ahmetbeyzade (2008), Wright (2011), Puar (2007) and Smith (2016) have criticised how Mbembe's definition of necropolitics ignores gender as an intersection. When attempting to understand how modern societies are modelled through social contracts, it is reductive to limit the discussion to White Supremacy while patriarchy has such a determining impact on the maintenance of the interests of the ruling classes.

Therefore Smith (2016) articulates the experience of Black mothers that lose their sons to police brutality both in the US and Brazil to show how necropolitics incorporates gendered strategies of terror. Smith (2016) borrows a definition of the effects of anti-Black state violence in the mothers of the favela from Andrea Beatriz dos Santos (cited in Smith, 2016), a Black community organiser and doctor who speaks of *sequela*, a medical term that refers to the morbid effect of a malady. The concept of *sequela* ('sequel' in English) articulated by Smith (2016) relates to the gendered and deadly effect of such violence in the affective community of the dead, making it more visible in the experiences of mothers. Such effect has been demonstrated in the works of Reis (2013), Perry (2013) and Rocha (2014), detailing how Black mothers suffer with the senseless loss of their loved ones, either with mental health conditions triggered by the sorrow of loss and powerlessness, with heart attacks from the stress of dealing with police's daily violence or other related conditions.

Rocha's (2014) PhD thesis in particular offers a relevant glimpse of Black motherhood through the ethnographic work with Black mothers from the favela in Brazil. She argues that Black mothering can be understood as the re-creation of Black sociability in the African Diaspora as a resistance to the genocide of Black people. In that sense, creating and nurturing Black life can be seen as a revolutionary opposition to the violent killing of the Black population since they are preserving Blackness (Rocha, 2014). As Algerian feminist Awa Thiam (1978, p 123) affirms, "In refusing to allow Black African civilization to be destroyed, our mothers were revolutionary. Yet some people describe this attitude as conservative" (1978, p.123).

Marielle embodied and represented such subjectivities as a Black mother and a *favelada*. Her latest legislative proposals were centred in Black motherhood: a project to guarantee humanised care for women going through abortion (in the cases permitted by law[4]) and *Espaço Coruja* (2017), a project to extend public child day-care times to allow women to continue to work or study in night shifts. It is known that the majority of women that are criminalised for abortion or who do not have access to safe abortions in Brazil are young and poor Black women (Blower and Pains, 2018). Marielle's praxis was also centred in Black feminist thought and activism, embodying knowledge and practice learned from early generations of Black feminists. It was an open commitment of hers, as stated for instance in an interview to the publication *Subjetiva* (2017) in which she clearly outlines her intentions as a political representative:

> [My] aspiration is that this house [city council] becomes more *favelizada*, Black, with more women and more amplified gender identities. Lana, a trans woman that is part of the team, was the first woman to have her social name in her work identity, so this is what we mean when we say that one lifts the other, this is specially a Black women's motto, with Black women occupying many spaces, with their turbans, with their sexual orientation, occupying this space that unfortunately still denies them access. (Franco, 2017)

Marielle Franco dared to occupy many spaces traditionally held by white and powerful men. More importantly, she occupied these spaces enforcing Black Feminist praxis as a radical activist working to protect the lives of the Black youth, women and the LGBTQ+ community, as I have shown in the first section of the article. I have also presented the context of necropolitical governance and genocide against the Black population in which Marielle Franco was murdered. We can conclude that her assassination both discloses the magnitude of necropolitical governance in Rio and highlights the urgency of continuing her legacy.

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4 Abortion rights are very restricted in Brazil, being permitted by law only in three situations: fetus anencephaly, pregnancies that endanger mother's lives or pregnancies resulted from rape. Varied organisations have denounced the clandestinity imposed on thousands of Brazilian women as a human rights violation.

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